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The Marsh
of Acheron

By FRED WOODROW

THE MARSH OF ACHERON;

OR,

THE PAGAN PURGATORY

ACCORDING TO SOCRATES.

BY

FRED WOODROW.

*"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them
that trespass against us."*

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Dedication.

TO AN AGED MOTHER

AT WHOSE KNEES WE WERE TAUGHT TO PRAY,

"forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,"

THIS HUMBLE USE OF A PAGAN DREAM

TO ILLUSTRATE A CHRISTIAN VERITY,

IS REVERENTLY INSCRIBED.

INTRODUCTION.

THESE verses are meant to illustrate the central idea of Socrates, as unfolded in his philosophic vision, "The Vision of Er."

The consequences of sin, its gradations in guilt, its retributive conditions, and the essential verity taught in the subsequent words and works of Christ—that in order to be forgiven man must forgive—are broadly and grandly outlined in the vision of the ancient sage.

"Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive them that trespass against us.*" To restate this divine condition of God's mercy, we give the vitalised idea, guessed at by Socrates, and taught with authority by Christ.

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I.

PAGAN PHILOSOPHY.

As in some ocean cave, remote from light and ample
sky,
The resonance of tide and wave
And seas that sweep around the orb,
Its darkened hollows lave;

Or, mirror'd in a brook, the lambent glories of the
skies,
And zones of fire, that blaze in space,
Recast their splendors in the drop
Upon a pebble's face;

So in the straitened soul of man are voices not his
own,
Diviner sounds on human strings,
And in the shades of mysteries
Are lights of better things.

Not left without a light to guide his steps across the
star,
To worlds beyond and ends unknown,
The whereabouts, beyond his ken,
The destiny, his own.

For Sage, and Seer, and Prophet old, whate'er his
 race or creed,
 Had of the Infinite his light
 Eclipsed perchance, but never quenched,
 In reason's darkest night.

Supreme above all evil powers, invisible and dread,
 The unerased Divine decree,
 That from the iron gates of doom
 Escape for man should be.

This way or that, the royal road, the nearest to the
 foot,
 For such as would the hill ascend;
 A human need the upward step,
 A living God the end.

From man to God, from doubt to truth, no seeker so
 remote
 But o'er the black and dread abyss
 There is one plank to span the gulf
 Beneath the precipice.

Nor age nor creed, nor race nor clime, nor man be-
 neath the sun,
 Forgot in that Eternal plan
 Which keeps, on Time's engulfing flood,
 An ark for drowning man.

As is the warmth of spring-tide skies diffused in mist
and rain,

That gently deal with branch and root,
As Summer gently rounds her noons
To ripen perfect fruit;

So, graciously the truth came forth, with growth of
human need,

In segments shown the God-made plan
To merge a midnight in a morn,
And shape a perfect man.

Scorn not the faiths of those who err, however far
astray.

A thread is in the tangled skein;
And, woven in the finished cloth,
The lost is found again.

In dreams and hints of what might be, old sages
mused and lived,

And half announced the truth they sought
In what might be a stammer'd word,
Or lone and mystic thought.

So, on the borders of the known, in solitudes un-
searched

Wider horizons, Faith discerns;
And on its altars in the dark,
The fire of worship burns.

Of heaven and hell, of fate and doom, eternity and
soul,
The sage and seer predict or dream,
Philosophy, the darken'd stair
To Deity supreme.

So spake the Sage of Acheron, in fable-cradled
truth,
And clouded thought; half hid, as stars
When drifting mists obscure their light
Behind the shadowed bars.

His mind embracing in its scope the destinies of
man,
Probations, futures, hopes, and fates,
When sin to dungeons leads the soul,
And Judgment shuts the gates.

II.

THE MARSH OF ACHERON.

A SPIRIT den, remote from earth, in some abysmal
space,
Shut in itself, lone, isolate,
A dreary blank, stagnation, death,
Accursed and desolate.

No mountain crag, sublimely piled above the drifting
clouds,
With diadems of sparkling snow,
Or leaping streams that cleave the rocks
To swell the floods below.

No music of a billow brave, or trickle of a brook,
Or silver space of restful lake
Among the sheaves of yellow grain,
Or willows of the brake.

Nor comes the breath of panting breeze, from lips of
sunny zones,
Nor gentle whispers of the wind,
With honey of the fragrant flowers
They kissed and left behind.

No melodies of singing birds, heard in the moonlit
 grove,
 Shy minstrels of the summer night,
 Or lark that from the upper skies
 Spreads music with the light.

The castaway of some lost barque may reach a lonely
 strand,
 And from his prison in the sea
 May watch the wing of passing gull
 And dream of being free.

Some midnight star, in steady poise, or speech of
 wind may tell
 Of hope and home, where not forgot,
 A benediction sails the deeps
 To cheer his lonely lot.

The criminal with bloody hands may climb the
 scaffold stair,
 Cringe 'neath the overhanging rope,
 And on the tearless crowd may look,
 But look in vain for hope.

Yet shines the sun above his head, and sings the
 little bird;
 His glazing eye may reach the sky,
 And Faith, that climbs the azure heights,
 Ennobles him to die.

But Acheron, condemned and cursed, in impotence
resigns
 Its loathsomeness to living death,
 And breathes in poisoned atmosphere
 Its own diseasèd breath.

And here in broad democracy of common curse and
fate,
 The royal mind that went astray,
 The leprous soul that herded swine
 And loved its sinful way.

Concealment past, deception vain; seen in the
clouded cup,
 The drop of death congealed within;
 The bitterness the nectar leaves,
 When sweetness leaves the sin.

Of conscience yet a latent spark, light in a broken
lamp,
 Perchance to be a purer flame,
 And kindle yet a whiter ray
 In ashes left of shame.

III.

CRY AND COGITATION.

As heard along the storm-swept shore,
When Ocean shakes his mane of white,
Roars at the silent crags, and leaps
The blackened spaces of the night :
So sweep o'er falling avalanche,
In leopard strides, precipitate,
The winds that storm the starless sky,
And scale the mountain's granite gate.

Amid the elemental din,
The misery and dying cry
Of some poor mariner who sinks
Beyond the harbour bar to die.
Refused a haven by the storm,
He gives the weary struggle o'er;
The vesper of a drowning man,
The welcome of a brighter shore.

So lifted up a pleading voice
Among the lost of Acheron,
Born of remorse, awakened fear,
And retrospect of mercies gone;
Not utterly without a hope,
Yet anchored in a stern despair —
Perchance some fate may carry up
The burden of a sinner's prayer.

“Can this be life? or is it death?
Am I a soul? Am I a thought?
A memory without a will,
To iron bondage brought?”

In what I am, a mystery,
In what may be, a fear,
In what I was, an agony,
A folly and a tear.

Enough of what was once is left
To make remembrance pain;
Enough to know the broken bell
Can never ring again.

What cannot be, methinks I know;
From what may be, I shrink:
The terror of a precipice
Is standing on its brink.

Remote from suns and stars and moons
In this dread place I wait.
Perchance some mercy unrevealed
May ope the dungeon gate.”

IV.

THE DECREE OF THE GODS.

THE angel guard at Acheron's gate stood stately and
alone,
His pinions as auroral fires that light the arctic zone,
His gaze was as the lightning's flash, his sword a
leaping flame,
And reeled the darkened hemisphere beneath his
mighty frame;
A messenger of that vast host that serve the gods of
space,
Horizons none to circle time, and boundaries none in
place;
Where Form is not, where Void's supreme, where
spreads no eagle's wing,
Where round the fires of central suns no circling
planets swing.

In ways unseen and mysteries, beyond the ken of man,
They fill the post invisible in heaven's wondrous plan,
From which the spectral hosts of Wrong retreat with
broken blade,
And Evil fails to rob the gods of what their hands had
made.
From these bright ranks invisible, a sentry kept the gate,
Where in the swamps of Acheron the dead await their
fate.

Upon his ear the spirit-cry falls with despairing wail;
 He spreads his wings of light above the spectral
 mourners pale;

He speaks, and o'er the waste is heard the thunder
 of his voice,

“How can the lost for mercy hope? How can the
 cursed rejoice?

Within a man the evidence that sin is not forgot,
 Nor time, nor death obliterates the foul and damning
 spot;

The all of man is in his sin, the sin in all the man,
 Exemption has no heaven hid where hell fills out the
 span.

For to the measure of the soul the measure of the sin,
 The pitcher, or the broken cup, the gauge of what's
 within.

The great and small, the wise, the fool, each in his
 grade and kind;

The guilt of sin leaves not a part that is not sin be-
 hind,

In height and depth, in breadth and length, each in
 his own degree.

The less, the great, the greater yet; the brook, the
 lake, the sea.

For you, O souls, the gods decree a time-suspended fate,
 Till such as ye have sinned against forget the hurt
 and hate;

Ye stay, though time itself expires, and earth shall be
 no more,

Till suns be dark, till seas be dry as sand upon the
 shore;

Till then, ye prisoned souls of men, till Mercy comes,
 ye wait
 Ere by my living hand I lift the bar of Acheron's
 gate."

So spake the seraph, and withdrew to depths of sa-
 ble shades,
 Where, as upon a western cloud, the sunset glory
 fades;
 So waned away the holy light that had on Acheron
 shone,
 And damps were dark, and souls were dumb as lips
 of sculptured stone.
 The snake and worm and spotted toad hid in the
 sodden slime,
 And spectral forms of hideous mien, peculiar to the
 clime,
 Breathed discontent and misery in sin-infected air,
 And, gasping in the stifling damps, partook of man's
 despair.
 Perplexed souls, consumed of shame, and dread of
 days to be;
 And Fate, a bare suspended sword, to fall as gods
 decree.

V.

CONSCIENCE SUMMONS ITS WITNESSES.

By memory and retrospect
The long entombèd dead appear,
With chiding voice and bitter curse,
And anguish borrowed of the past,
Of sin, and shame, and fear.

From humble grave and royal tomb,
From pyramid and potter's fields,
From coral beds of purple seas,
The dead beneath the prison stones,
Escutcheons, tablets, shields.

A spectral host: souls halt and maimed,
Deformed, defiled, and trouble-scarred;
The glory born of mind and gods,
The royal face upon the coin,
Defaced, debased, and marred.

From river-mud and pauper straw,
The face that wears a frozen shame,
Set like a stone in mute reproach
Of him the traitor of her love
And vandal of her fame.

He sees the form, he knows the face,
 The broadened brow divine and fair;
 Hears what its cold, dead lips have said,
 And sees the flash in glaring eyes,
 Amidst the tangled hair.

Can deep regret, or bitter tear,
 The virtue lost again restore?
 Can aught bring back the loveliness
 That perished in his vile embrace,
 To live again no more?

A memory in shrivelled skin,
 Of scanty crust and grudgèd crumb,
 And blistered lips at plenty's breast,
 To plead for sustenance and find
 Maternal answer dumb.

Of granaries that cracked with grain,
 With famine at the close-barred door;
 The bread of God denied a man
 Whose hands were clean of every crime
 But that of being poor.

From battle-field a bloody hand
 In service of Ambition's lust,
 With gaping scar and palsied grip,
 Consigned as food to hungry wolf,
 Or scattered with the dust.

For feather in a chieftain's plume,
For glory in a bandit's crown,
The sacred gift of human life,
The holy claim of love and kin,
 Denied and trampled down.

From shambles of the crimsoned earth,
Behold the grim and spectral host.
The curses of its countless dead
To blight the Victor's stolen bays,
 And damn his proudest boast.

From temple nave and altar step
A pilgrim, desolate and blind,
Perverted in his will and creed;
A shackle on the limping foot,
 A cloud upon the mind.

With reeling gait, unconscious act,
Mind vagrant from its steady poise,
The spirit attributes defiled,
Nor left aspiring foot to scale
 The ditch in which it dies.

A ruin, wreck, and sacrifice
Consumed in sacrilegious fire,
The pure, the good, the God-designed,
To pander with the vile, and die
 In perishing desire.

Cajoled and coaxed to evil ends,
 The tempter, subtle as the snake
 Coiled in the scented shade of flowers,
 To stretch itself when sleepers dream,
 And bite them ere they wake.

A mother's face o'er this lost boy,
 Sad prophetess with whitened hair,
 Bespeaks the retributive fate
 Of such as wrought the ruin dire,
 And must the judgment share.

Oh, stern impeachment of the lost!
 Oh, verdict just of gods and men!
 Oh, judgment writ on page of tears!
 With nought to change the grim decree
 Or stay the iron pen.

The hunger and thirst, the shame and the tear,
 The neck with a yoke, the heart with a fear,
 The robbed of the right, the burdened with wrong,
 The cry of the weak, the curse of the strong,
 The truth that was hid, the broken of trust,
 The scorn of the good, the hate of the just,
 The wrongs and the sins of man with man, —
 Forgive them who may, forget them who can.
 Go forth, ye dead souls, go dry up the tears,
 The witnessing blood that is staining the spheres;
 For cut in the rocks the name and the deed.
 Go rub them away, or the gods may read:
 For Justice decrees, and nothing denies, —
 "The soul with a sin is the soul that dies."

VI.

CONFESSION AND DESPAIR.

THE thirsty Arab thinks he spies, beyond the tawny
sand,
The palms and vines and waterfalls of some enchanted
land,
And hurries on his panting steed to grass and grateful
stream,
Yet finds the paradise he seeks, delusion and a dream.
Or in a woodland's darkened nook, benighted travel-
ler sees
A lamp that glows in cottage pane beneath the forest
trees;
And dreams of kindly face and cheer, and glow of
ruddy fire;
Of gentle maid and matron kind, and hospitable sire,
And shapes his course by brook and brake to reach
the promised rest,
Wades thro' the stream and climbs the hill, with un-
abated zest,
To find the light he seeks recede across the pathless
moor,
And but a shade where fancy saw an open cottage door.
So what of light and hope might be, if but auspicious
spark,
A glint forecast on eastern cloud, of dawn to follow
dark.

Within its own extinguishment a denser midnight left,
 As is the deeper hopelessness when of its dreams be-
 reft,
 Heard like a moan upon the shore, when tides roll
 slow and faint,
 A chastened dirge, a hymnal low, confessional, com-
 plaint.

“ Eternal justice has its rounds,
 The circle is complete,
 Sins, sped away on lifting wings,
 Return with bleeding feet.

From whence it came the guilt returns,
 The One comes back as Two;
 In every cause a consequence
 To double all we do.

As echo answers to the voice,
 And music to the string;
 So Judgment is the sounding-board
 On which the changes ring.

We cannot be, to foe or friend,
 More than of us they know;
 The black is black forevermore,
 The snow remains the snow.

Forgiveness from the souls we cursed?
An ocean rolls between :
Nor sail of ship, nor wing of bird
'Tween shore and shore are seen.

Forgiveness is the gift of gods,
It has no spring in sin,
And what can come from out man's soul
That was not first within ?

The past! alas! a changeless shade
That is, and is to be
Forever on the tides of time,
A dead face in the sea."

VII.

THE ANGEL'S REPRIMAND.

PERSONAL MERCY, THE CONDITION OF FAVOUR WITH THE
GODS.—FORGIVENESS INVOKED FOR THE MUTUAL SAL-
VATION.

ACROSS the angel-sentry's brow there swept a passing
frown,
As sweeps a cloud across the sun before its going
down;
The angel spread his wings of light, and poised above
the gloom,
Rang out sonorous syllables across the marsh of
doom.
“Hear me, ye witnesses,” he cried, “of guilt and
hurt and hate,
To you these souls, by gods consigned, their destiny
and fate.
To you they owe the awful debt nor time nor tears
can pay,
And love alone can cancel sin and wipe the stain
away.
To you by gods it stands decreed, deliverance or
doom;
Ye are the only lamps to light, or clouds to damn the
gloom.

Can ye forgive ? If not, beseech the gods for such a
 grace,

For if ye lack this gift divine, ye have with gods no
 place.

For souls of men, to be at rest, they must that resting
 know

There is no heaven in the skies for what are hells
 below.

For space itself has no abyss where soul of man finds
 peace,

Till hate and wrath and enmity within himself shall
 cease.

Yourselves are doomed, as are these souls, to home-
 lessness in space,

Till mercy is your brightest world, and love your
 sweetest grace.

As like begets its kindred like, the music to the string,
 And to the will of flying bird the beating of the wing,

So in the mystery of love and rhythm of heaven's plan,
 To be in harmony with God, forgive your fellow-man.

Seal not, O Souls! another's doom, by making it
 your own,

And sow again the seed of death, to reap the crop
 that's sown.

Till stars are quenched and suns are cold these souls
 in prisons stay,

Till ye, accusers of their guilt, forgive and lead the way.
 For none can reach the heavenly gate, or mount the

jasper wall,
 That leaves an unforgiven soul in bonded woe and

thrall."

VIII.

THE FORGIVING ACCUSERS.

VICTIMS AND SUFFERERS RETURN.—THE SPIRIT OF MERCY
BRINGS FORGIVENESS AND LIBERATION.

YEARS flee away in silent flight
To spaces of the vast abyss,
O'er continents and zones;
Rocks crumble, as the centuries tread
On mountain-tops and silent dead,
Dominions, kings, and thrones.

And still the Marsh of Acheron
A prison is for helpless souls
Awaiting their release;
If time, perchance, should change their fate,
And enter in the dungeon gate
The messengers of peace.

If Love at last with sceptre held,
O'er memories of guilt and wrong,
Its undivided sway;
And Mercy, in the heart of man,
Fulfilling the diviner plan,
Should hail redemption's day.

By lower loves the higher found,
The first in man, the last in God,
 The greater from the less;
As he who trains a springtide vine
May fill his flagon with the wine,
 When autumn treads the press.

And mirrored in its love of man,
The love that centres in a god,
 The highest and the best;
And living nearest heaven's door,
That holds the poorest of the poor
 The closest to its breast.

For what is lost, a saving hand;
For blemish and for bruise, a balm;
 For thirsty lips, a spring;
And in the depths of dark despair,
And stillness of the midnight air,
 The sound of angel's wing.

The softer touch, the sweeter tone,
The most, for such as have the least,
 Of honey, milk, and wine;
Where darkness is, and winter frost,
And men despond, and souls are lost,
 Sweet Charity divine!

Evangel this, divinely fair,
The angel hailed at Acheron,
And swung the iron gate;
Flung in the Marsh the massive key,
And worshipped at the mystery
Of Mercy changing Fate.

IX.

MERCY LIBERATES THE IMPRISONED.

THE TRANSFORMATION. — FROM ACHERON TO PARADISE.

BEHOLD a vision warm and bright,
Benign as hue of rainbow, spread
 Upon a stormy sky;
And on the air a joyful note,
As from a linnets' tuneful throat,
 A woodland melody.

Shone through the fog the blessed light,
The dreary swamps were bright and green,
 Birds whistled in the grove;
The flash of waterfall, the sheen
Of limpid brooks and grateful stream,
 And silvered wing of dove.

Heard once again the friendly voice,
And music of the fireside lute,
 And chime of swinging bell;
Browsed on the plain the bleating flocks,
And shadowed by the mountain rocks,
 The temple in the dell.

And as the sun, thro' thick-plied husk
 Of buried seed, awakes the germ
 To leave its darkened bed;
 In cracking shell and crumbling clod,
 And o'er the turf that robes the sod,
 Its royal branches spread:

So warmed and thrilled, revived, revealed,
 A waking sense of new delight,
 Transforming soul and scene,
 Of suns and skies; gods, angels, men,
 A revelation in the ken
 Of soul-entrancing dream.

The circle of the universe
 In every segment true;
 Nowhere a vagrant line.
 The merging of the human will
 With purposes that roundly fill,
 The human and divine.

Peace with the gods and peace with men,
 The one absorbs the two
 In unit consecrate;
 And he who spares no man his love
 From that he prays to find above,
 Behold him separate.

X.

THE OLD FAITH AND THE NEW.

So rose and set — the early suns of ancient thought
On mysteries of soul and fate;
Of gods and men, sin, judgment, hell,
And paradises consecrate.

Of soul and sin, futurities and destinies,
Enough of light to see a shade,
And lofty minds to scale the heights
From which the farther heavens fade.

Thus in a folded bud, the blossom yet to be;
In crimsoned east, the coming sun;
In trickling springs, the rivers broad,
Across a continent to run.

Till in the hour born to greet the greater needs,
The brighter light, the broader plan,
And by the cross of Christ revealed
Redemption there for fallen man.

XI.

THE ANGELIC INVOCATION.

THE CELESTIAL MESSENGER WORSHIPS AT THE ALTAR OF
DIVINE LOVE, AND ADORES ITS MAJESTY AND MERCY.

O LOVE divine! Love infinite! O majesty! O mys-
tery of the Eternal mind!

Expiring suns, and waning moons, and paling fires
of burning star, — they come, they pass away.

The centuries as raindrops fall in oceans of eternity;
and time shall cease to be.

But thou, O Deity supreme! O Infinite of infinities!
there is no change in thee.

Love was thy name, O mighty one, ere rolled the
wondrous waves of light upon the shores of time;

When man was not, nor seraph wing made music in
the solitudes of spaces, spheres, and stars,

Thou wast, and art, and still wilt be, in all that is,
and is to be, a Love unquenchable.

Methought in this, the rounded noon of truth and
love,

I heard a later angel sing,

As 'twixt the mountains and the stars

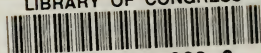
The fuller chimes of Mercy ring.

Man, brooding on his planet home, what can he
know, or grasp, or see of thee, O living God?
How count his years, his centuries: his chronicles of
name and fame on thy eternal page?
His tears, his woes, his agonies, his deeper gloom of
spirit-storm, dim not a single star.
He comes, he goes, dust unto dust; he crumbles
with his crowns and thrones—and stars still
shine on seas.
But thou, O Majesty supreme! in all thy splendour
uncreate, the unapproachable,
For this thy handiwork, a man, thou hast reserved
immortal place, in thy august design;
O'er seraph hosts, in spheres or suns, o'er death itself,
o'er sin and doom, thy palaces his home;
Declared to him thy Fatherhood; sublimest mystery
of thought—sonship of man to thee!
God manifest in human form, incarnate love, a
Roman cross, and bloody agony;
By mystery or sacrifice, atonement made, and justice
met, the bonded soul redeemed.
The boasted wisdom of the sage fails in its loftiest
flight, thy mysteries to reach.
Enough for human heart to know that faith in thee
absolves its guilt, and he who will, may seek
The Christ of God, the shining road, away from sin
and sin's abyss, to thee, O God, to thee!"

From A G Webb—

11 July 1890

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